The Colony.

By Daniel Pernar.

I will not see the end of it—

If I were to kill myself, it would still be too late.

The waltz has plagued my library for forty years.

It proves unsolvable.

I sit and watch widows, older than God, clutch their urns. They repeat through a pointless one-two-three.

‘Oh, Delilah, do join us!’ said Nancy.

I pointed heavenward. ‘Join those vermin, Nancy.’

She followed my finger up to the dampened ceiling. ‘Archer tells me to keep dancing, dearest.’

Nancy was an avid collector of dust. Leather stretched over a buckled skeleton, excess heart, deficient sense. Revolting.

‘He’s hiding his heavenly mistress,’ said Barbara, ‘Ned tells me.’

Barbara danced with a cigarette in her mouth, her arms wrapped around Ned’s urn, now an ashtray. Ill-raised; a necessary texture for the colony.

I never invite the deceased; the dead were never silent unless their widows refused my cordyceps tea. A sleuth might blame the psilocybin, but the librarian solves less magical crimes.

Occasionally, a thought arrives fully formed. I don’t recognise its source; I catalogue it anyway.

Even so, I look down at the urn beside me. A thick layer of growth coated the table beneath it. I have never heard my beloved respond.

I wait for an answer; I’m not sure who from.

Nancy. Barbara. One of them was responsible.

Which one was the murderer?

They waltzed over bodies that belonged to the colony. Vera Forester. Mrs. Edson. The Montgomery sisters. Forced into the widow's ball while the living celebrated the equinox outdoors.

Barbara's cigarette fell from her teeth to a floor covered in cremains and carcasses, whilst Nancy brought her free hand to her mouth. Blood seeped through her glove as she coughed, anharmonic, disrupting the pointless jazz fusion.

'Oh dear, the air is quite thick,' said Nancy, 'it does rather upset my poor lungs.'

Barbara lit herself up, standing over ashes and cigarette butts, scattered from Ned's urn. 'Shut your mouth. You might quell the invasion.'

She lifted the half-empty urn and waltzed, moving as if she had one foot: her left.

Barbara was too obvious; Nancy was too stupid to manage it. Most years, women like her are poisoned first. She remained poised.

This episode repeats annually: a librarian and her massacre, staged as crime scene theatre. I have never found a culprit.

I endure this dance as I endure myself: poorly.

We all have our buckets; centenarians fill mine.

Nobody dares visit my library. The air has grown musty, the books moulded, and their curator remains the most decayed. Yet yearly, the colony convenes for this bloodbath. Their widows aren't afforded independence.

There was no fog machine. A porous haze fell over the reading room. Through the damp vapour, Barbara's gaze sharpened.

'Are we not dying quickly enough, Delilah?'

I could only see an ember flicker through the mist.

'Is this an accusation, Barbara?'

It was unclear whether Barbara laughed or coughed. Her tempo increased. She moved toward me until her face emerged from the haze. Smiling.

'You're the only one. You can't have me believe Nancy carried this out.'

I pursed my lips. ‘How do they decide who plays the poisoner?’

Her cigarette dropped from her mouth.

‘Nihilism doesn’t make you special, Delilah. It makes you…a suspect’

Tears welled in Nancy’s eyes. She continued to waltz.

Behind us, the thump of a body, then the crash of a half-filled urn, echoed throughout the library.

‘How did you do it?’ I asked the moron.

Nancy’s chin rested on her urn. Her eyes locked onto a patch on the floor.

I shook my head. ‘They never tell me in the end.’

Nancy’s feet perfectly followed the lift of the jazz swing. She raised her head and fixed her eyes on the cultivated rot lining the bookshelves.

Tears fell freely. ‘I’m quite tired, Delilah.’

‘Will you tell me?’

Nancy feigned a smile; blood trickled from her lip.

‘It’s all an act, isn’t it?’

I gripped the armrest. I attempted to stand. My legs failed.

‘How did you murder—'

‘Enough.’

Nancy’s feet slowed until she stood still, her eyes glossed over.

‘He’s gone.’

Blood leaked from her nose. Then a tremor passed through her.

‘I can’t hear him anymore.’

She turned to me.

‘I can’t feel him. Smell him. See him.’

Her mouth set into a thin line.

‘Delilah—I can’t see anything.’

I closed my eyes. I knew what would follow; it would be my job to clean it.

Foreign thoughts surfaced in the darkness. Cheering voices overlapped; Nancy’s screams interrupted the chorus.

‘Archer—my Archer! Dear, what did you look like again?’

Her breathing grew louder.

‘Please, my dear—w-wait for…’

A thud followed. Then nothing.

I sighed and removed my glove. My fungal fingers reached for my own urn.

It’s been forty years since my beloved passed. I cannot remember his name; a thick layer of growth coats his urn.

I do not care enough to search.

The mushrooms on my hand vibrated as they approached the colony. Fungi stretched from the urn, across every wall, through every book, along every shelf.

Voices arrive again; two women have joined them. I did not kill these widows. I cultivated the conditions.

The haze dissolves as mould overtakes the massacre before me.

Toadstools grow brighter. Stems grow longer. The colony is pleased.

Next year, I will make another attempt. I must invite them. I must understand the trick.

Perhaps then I can reverse the sin of being born.

I feel guilty for yearning, but I have little choice.

If I killed myself now, it would already be far too late.